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The Iowa Review

Volume 18
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 4

1988

To Build a House

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Donald. "To Build a House." *The Iowa Review* 18.1 (1988): 27-39. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3610>

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To Build a House · *Donald Hall*

*A model! A model! What in hell would I do with
a model? When I need to check something I go to
my wife and lift her chemise.*

—Aristide Maillol

*We consider that we have succeeded when hys-
terical misery turns into ordinary unhappiness.*

—Sigmund Freud

Gazing at May's blossoms, imagining bounty of McIntosh,
I praise old lilacs rising in woods beside cellarholes;
I praise toads. I predict the telephone call
that reports the friend from childhood cold on a staircase.
I praise children, grandchildren, and just-baked bread.
I praise fried Spam and onions on slices of Wonder Bread;
I praise your skin. I predict the next twenty years,
days of mourning, long walks growing slow and painful.
I reject twenty years of mid-life; I reject rejections.
The one day stands unmoving in sun and shadow.

*When I rise at eight o'clock my knuckles are stiff.
I sit for an hour wearing my nightgown in a sunny chair.
Hot water from the faucet, black coffee, and two aspirin
unstick my fingerjoints, and by these hands I join
the day that will never return. This is the single
day that extends itself, intent as an animal listening
for food, while I chisel at alabaster. All day I know
where the sun is. To seize the hour, I must cast myself
into work that I love, as the keeper hurls
horsemeat to the lion:—I am meat, lion, and keeper.*

*This afternoon the King and Queen of Norway drove
uptown from their consulate to my studio. As we sat
drinking tea together, they were fastidious and democratic;
I had been told: It was not required to curtsey . . .
When the entourage disappeared into Second Avenue
I changed into jeans and climbed on my sore ankle
to the marble under the skylight. Matisse said, "Work
is paradise"; Rodin, "To work is to live without dying";
Flaubert, "It passes the time." For three hours
my mallet tapped while Donatello hovered above me.*

There are ways to get rich: Find an old corporation,
self-insured, with capital reserves. Borrow
to buy: Then dehire managers; yellow-slip maintenance;
pay public relations to explain how winter is summer;
liquidate reserves and distribute cash in dividends:
Get out, sell stock for capital gains, reward the usurer,
and look for new plunder—leaving a milltown devastated,
workers idle on streetcorners, broken equipment, no cash
for repair or replacement, no inventory or credit.
Then vote for the candidate who abolishes foodstamps.

*I embrace the creation, not for what it signifies,
but for volume and texture thrusting up
from the touched places. I marry the creation that stays
in place to be worked at, day after day.
The sparrow lights on my fire-escape once and once only;—
there is only the one self; my day is to carve it.
That my mother disintegrated while I watched her
flies past my window once; that I burned white houses
in middle-life flies past my barred window once.
To know how the sparrow flies turns hours to marble.*

After the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia
the delegates started for home on horseback and in carriages
for the former colonies of Massachusetts and Virginia,
for York State. They visited with friends telling stories.
They traveled all day; at nightfall they rested in taverns.
The moon waxed and waned; days grew long and shortened again;
it snowed; spring melted snow revealing gray grass.
Some sold horses to board steamboats working the rivers,
then disembarked for trains that shook out sparks
setting fire to grassy plain, sheepbarn, and farmhouse.

Some delegates hitched rides chatting with teamsters;
some flew stand-by and wandered stoned in O'Hare
or borrowed from King Alexander's National Bank: None
returned to plantation, farm, or townhouse.
They wandered weary until they encountered each other
again, converging on Hollywood Boulevard bordered with bars
in their absurd clothing like movie extras, Federalist
and Republican descending the cloverleaf together
to engage another Convention at the Hollywood-La Brea Motel—
wearing their nametags, befuddled, unable to argue.

There are ways to get by. When we bought this grownover
orchard from Bone's widow, we burnt birch the first winter
and worked odd-jobs part-time: sugaring, logging, substitute
teaching, schoolbus-driving. The first summer we culled
old trees past saving (next winter we kept ourselves warm
in the scent of applewood); others we trimmed and topdressed.
Next spring we set out three hundred semidwarves
in the old hayfield that sloped north by the disused
railroad under the pasture turned into woodlot: McIntosh
mostly, New Hampshire's goodness, October's fiery compacted

appleflesh; Cortland, Empire, Strawberry, Astrakhan,
Baldwin, Spy . . . We order our days by the paradisa
routine of apples: from winter of pies and cider
through spring's trim and exaltation of blossom,
through summer's attention and repair: then picking
with neighbors, selling at roadside, packing for market . . .
We age among apples—in dread of icestorm, wet snow
in May, drought, August wind forcing an early drop; wary
of bark-eating deer, of bears that break branches climbing.
From the first orchard to the last is one day and eternity.

Smoke rises all day from two chimneys above us.
You stand by the stove looking south, through bare branches
of McIntosh, Spy, and Baldwin. You add oak logs
to the fire you built at six in the castiron stove.
At the opposite end of the same house, under another chimney,
I look toward the pond that flattens to the west
under the low sun of a January afternoon, from a notebook
busy with bushels and yields. All day in our opposite
rooms we carry wood to stoves, we pace up and down, we plan,
we set figures on paper—to converge at day's end

for kisses, bread, and talk; then we read in silence,
sitting in opposite chairs; then we turn drowsy.
Dreaming of tomorrow only, we sleep in the painted bed
while the night's frail twisting of woodsmoke assembles
overhead from the two chimneys, to mingle and disperse
as our cells will disperse and mingle when they lapse
into graveyard dirt. Meantime the day is double
in the work, love, and solitude of eyes
that gaze not at each other but at a third thing:
a child, a ciderpress, a book—work's paradise.

From north pole and south we approach each other;
Atlantic encounters Pacific, up meets down:
Where extremes meet we make our equator: — Your body
with narrow waist and carved shoulders, hips
comely, breasts outswopping; my body intent,
concentrated, and single. We enter this planisphere
without strangeness, betrayal, or risk; our bodies
after bright tumult float in shadow and repose
of watery sleep, skin's fury settling apart
and pole withdrawing to pole: A bed is the world.

Or: Buy fifty acres of pasture from the widower:
Survey, cut a road, sub-divide; bulldoze the unpainted
barn, selling eighteenth-century beams with bark
still on them; bulldoze foundation granite that oxen sledged;
bulldoze stonewalls set with lost skill; bulldoze the cape
the widower lived in; bulldoze his father's seven-apple tree.
Drag the trailer from the straggly orchard to the dump:
Let the poor move into the spareroom of their town
cousins; pave garden and cornfield; build weekend houses
for skiers and swimmers; build Slope 'n' Shore; name the new

road Blueberry Muffin Lane; build Hideaway Homes
for executives retired from pricefixing for General Electric
and migrated north out of Greenwich to play bridge
with neighbors migrated north out of Darien. Build huge
centrally heated colonial ranches—brick, stone, and wood
confounded together—on pasture slopes that were white
with clover, to block public view of Blue Mountain.
Invest in the firm foreclosing Kansas that exchanges
topsoil for soybeans. Vote for a developer as United States
Senator. Vote for statutes that outlaw visible poverty.

*I crashed like my daredevil pilots; it was what
I wanted. For two years I moved among institutions,
admitted because of barbiturates—I took pills
to keep from dreaming—alcohol, and depression.
Electroshock blanked me out. If I worked my hands shook;
when I carved, my chisel slipped making errors:—
I contrived art of errors. For five years I talked
with a white-haired woman three times a week.
Once toward the end I complained: “Is it possible, ever,
to be single-minded?” I spoke in discouragement, glimpsing*

*the erratum-slip on my psyche: “For love read hate
throughout; for hate read love.” White eyebrows wavered:
“In this life?” she asked; but she added: “One day
you will love someone.” I wept the whole hour with relief
and without confidence. If singleness is impossible, how
do we discover its idea that mocks us? Our longing
for being, beyond doubt and skepticism, assembles itself
from moments when the farmer scything alfalfa fills
with happiness as the underground cave fills with water;
or when we lose self in the hourless hour of love.*

*The one day clarifies and stays only when days depart:
“The days you work,” said O’Keeffe, “are the best days.”
Whole mornings disappeared through my hand into elmwood
before me. I did what I wanted: As my hand
strengthened I lost day after day that did not return
doubled and burnt in drug-time’s cindery lapse.
No longer did I rage at my young father for dying
in the wrecked car. I slept all night without murder:
I talked with my friend; with my children I visited
the zoo on Wednesday; teasing I cooked them dinner.*

*When I was forty I married again. I kept him twelve years
until the occlusion snapped him off like a light.
Now when I am painful, when the beekeeper's shadow approaches
up the desolate block, I number his disappearance
among the griefs and cinders where it belongs;
but neither the howl of loss nor ecstatic adventure remains
largest in store: My grainshed keeps the single
repeated green-valley day, repose of imaginable summer,
long hours not hours at all, vacant of number:
Like great Holsteins we chewed the voluptuous grass.*

From burnt houses and blackened shrubs, green rises
like bread. Because the Revolution fails; because men
and women are corrupt and equal; because we eat topsoil
and Massachusetts smokes Virginia's tobacco; because
dancers twist in Alexandrine and millennial light
and lemons grow smaller in the groves; because the old
house burnt, because I burnt it, we carry green inside
from the hill: Potted plants on shelves braced
at every window or hanging in rope fingers take sunlight:
We drowse on a green bed in the valley of the third thing.

Here, among the thirty-thousand days of a long life,
a single day stands still: The sun shines, it is raining;
we sleep, we make love, we plant a tree, we walk up and down
eating lunch: The day waits at the center
when I reached out to touch the face in the mirror
and never touched glass, touched neither cheekbone nor eyelid,
touched galaxies instead and the void they hung on.
The one day extended from that moment, unrolling
continuous as the broad moon on water, or as motions of rain
that journey a million times through air to water.

Years later when I fell down drunk in Albany,
at the bus depot, among strangers, in rage and confusion,
when police behaved rudely to me, when I was nothing,
the day regarded me from its green distance
with pity—bewildered, yet steadfast as bread or apples.
When I woke again in the yellow Albany morning,
the day resided with me still. The wrist's knuckle
celebrates only the deject passion of self-regard;
cigarette smoke builds a house of daydream or idleness
to mimic clapboard and granite of the house we live in.

The one day speaks of July afternoons, of February
when snow builds shingle in spruce, when the high sugarmaple
regards the abandoned barn tilted inward, moving
in storm like Pilgrims crossing the Atlantic under sail.
The one day recalls us to hills and meadows, to moss,
roses, dirt, apples, and the breathing of timothy—
away from the yellow chair, from blue smoke and daydream.
Leave behind appointments listed on the printout!
Leave behind manila envelopes! Leave dark suits behind,
boarding passes, and soufflés at the Chancellor's house!

The great rock at the side of the road reminds us.
Long ago we slipped, rodents among ferns like redwoods;
elongating our claws we climbed the baobab;
for millennia we hung by one hand eating with the other
until we dropped to hide in lengthening grass;
by the waterhole we walked upright sniffing for cats;
we chased elephants into the bog with our brothers;
for ten thousand years we scudded beneath bushes: I leaned
from ladder into tree; you watered the Burgundy Lily.
When we die it is the cell's death in a hair-end.

At the close of one day, nearly overcome by shadow,
the breath makes permanent house: spirit never visible.
Because we never catch glimpse of it, unobserved
it animates the day, like wellwater
after harvesting under September sun; like my mother's
painful hand that rubbed my father's head all night
when he lay dying; like the color green. Nebuchadnezzar
and the grocer fish with the same pole:
Nebuchadnezzar listens to his chief of staff complaining;
the grocer's son has broken his arm in Texas.

*I walk around a corner in the strange town and arrive
at the first street of my childhood—the house half-blue,
half-yellow, the black Pierce Arrow beside it. The tomcat
plays with his mother, sucking and teasing; he cuffs
his mother's jaw. The tomcat limps home in the bloody
morning, ear torn. The tomcat sleeps all day
in a portion of sun, fur tatty over old scars, pulls
himself to the saucer of milk, and snores going back
to sleep, knowing himself the same. The kitten leaps
in the air, her paws spread like a squirrel's.*

The one day stands unmoving in sun and shadow:
like the tuft of grass left behind in the pasture
when the Holstein heard the farmer call her for milking
and remembered fresh millet; like Tunisian aqueducts
and butcherblock counters; like Blackwater Pond
with its dirt road; like the committee meeting's styrofoam cup
that lives so briefly to contain coffee and its whitener
for ten minutes between the cellophaned stack
and the trash compactor; like the granite boulder
that the glacier deposited by the orchard's creek.

We visit our friends in their house at the town's edge.
My best friend is fifty now, his wife ten years younger.
They have a stout, strong baby named for a President
who stands in his highchair adorned with oatmeal
and waves his fists over his head like a boxer,
making bird-noises and laughing. As we watch
the vigorous father and mother laughing with their son,
we know that they undertake with energy
to enter the final determination of their lives;
in muscular bodies they walk to their deaths together.

Now as sun elicits seed planted after the full
moon's last frost in the springtime; or as crops ripen
south to north in August, slowly, as corn turns
green to gold; or as leaves redden in the northcountry,
gradually at first, a few branches, then whole trees led
by carmine swampmaples, hillsides brilliant overnight,
and then leaves falling, fading in November rain—
so their deaths enter upon them, while their brash
baby makes bird-noises standing in his highchair,
the invisible death hatching inside him also.

We return to inhabit this old house over Bone's orchard
that we will abandon in death only, our bodies slow
to assemble each morning as we gaze north at our trees.
We congregate, we grow to diminish again, we drowse.
*I remember the dead fox warm on the barn floor,
inexplicably dead, and how my grandmother tenderly
lifted the body on her pitchfork, strands of hay
under the delicate corpse of the young red fox,
to the burying place by the willow at the garden's edge
where we left the barncat's kittens killed in the road.*

*When my body shook again with the body's passion,
it was possible only because I expected nothing.
The storm's rake that uprooted rockmaples granted
shape to the hill. Of course I must visit again
the burnt car and the sodality of white houses
where a wretched child stands carrying toys and staring
under the sun that will not let her sleep.
I will never read again the inscription, false with clarity,
that once I lived by; neither will I deny
the unreadable book printed from these abandonments.*

There is also the day of general anaesthesia, when one
pushes the other's stretcher into the elevator
that descends to the operating room in the dark of dawn.
When the surgeon telephones midmorning he reports
cancer. As you return from Recovery I sit by your bed
to tell you: No one else may tell you.
For a week as the pathologist studies dyed tissue,
we hold each other, we weep, we repeat reasonable
words of reassurance; but the mind projects
reel after reel of horror, pity, and self-pity.

The bed is bodily pain and the solitary deaths
of preparation for death. The awake nightmare
comforts itself by painting the mourner's portrait:
As I imagine myself on grief's rack at graveside
I picture and pity myself. When pathology supplies
the jargon of reassurance, I have buried your body
a thousand times. Gradually we recover pulse
to return to the bed's world and the third thing:
Still the stretcher forever enters the elevator going
down, and the telephone lacerates silence.

Now the lost friend or the repudiated self
sinks into wood of the table, throat heaving with veins,
hands trembling to hold the beer for waking up with,
tumbler of whiskey to steady his hands until lunch.
He is fat now, transparent hanging flesh, and he sighs
for lost love and betrayed day: — for what he wanted.
Or he walks the criminal's yard in the penitentiary
at Clinton, cursing and mumbling, seeing no one,
tracks on his arm scabbed over — that one shaking there,
gray-faced, who once was eager in pursuit of honor:

He walks delicately, impeccably, trembling in outrage,
among criminals in New York, like a sick fox
seeking the hay-floor. When my sister drowns
my lungs fill also: We are one cell perpetually
dying and being born, led by a single day that presides
over our passage through the thirty-thousand days
from highchair past work and love to suffering death.
We plant; we store the seedcorn. Our sons and daughters
topdress old trees. Two chimneys require:
Work, love, build a house, and die. But build a house.

Now pews fill for a Baptism; now white doors open
on a weekday for a funeral: — We file past the raised
lid of a coffin, confirming, and bury our neighbor
in the churchyard's village where flags fray over graves
of the 24th New Hampshire Volunteers under hemlocks
as dark as shutters. If once a lay preacher stole
the collection money; if a deacon hanged himself
in his barn, — each December Advent circles to return
and again Advent's child cures in Good Friday sun.
On the first Sunday of every month we assemble

molecules of Jesus from their diaspora and drive
downward to the dead of Zion's parish. As we pray
for the unborn they look backward upon us. The day
solves itself in love and work because the hands
of the hospice worker and her voice provide connection.
When the rain drives on the poppies they hold bright
petals to the rain. From pew to pew we construct together
geographies of a day—as in Beijing at Easter,
in the eightsided wooden Church, the choir's Chinese
voices roar the hymn, and up from the grave he rises.

*When I was ninety I spent my days beside the window,
looking at birds from my wheelchair; sometimes I sketched.
To go to the White House for the President's Medal,
I needed help, and the Secret Service was helpful.
I omitted my diuretic that morning; that day I fasted.
A limousine took me to the airbase where I was hoisted
into Air Force One for the brief flight to Andrews.
I remembered little of the day, although with old friends
gathered for the ceremony I chatted about the past.
I felt no pain except when I stood for the medal.*

This morning we watch tall poppies light up
in a field of grass. At the town dump, one styrofoam cup
endures eight hundred years. Under the barn,
fat and ancient grandfather spider sleeps
among old spoked wheels: Breathing we shake his web:
It is always this time; the time that we live by
is this time. Together we walk in the high orchard
at noon; it is cool, although the sun poises upon us.
Among old trees the creek breathes slowly,
bordered by fern. The toad at our feet holds still.